

How is Sustainability ‘Materialised’ in Tourism? Contested Materials in the Production of Sustainable Tourism Discourse

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Abstract

Meaning is one of the most elusive and ubiquitous properties of tourism spaces. This paper analyses the ambiguity of meaning in the materiality of tourism sustainability. Sustainable development and its three interrelated principles of holism, equity and futurity have now seriously entered the lexicon of the tourism academe whilst also securing a strong footing in many tourism spaces, the tourism industry, marketing and promotion. Concerned with the materialization of sustainability (how it is brought into material being, its visual and tangible realization) this paper focuses on how the discourse of sustainability has been translated into the use (and misuse) of certain materials.

The natural, the ecological, the environmentally ‘sound’ and dare I say the ‘authentic’; the *‘illusive real’* can be seen, found (or searched for) in the materiality of tourism developments. Local timber, sand, reed, slate, cane, and so on, each compound the essence of sustainability in the materials used in tourism construction. Yet the new potentiality of fraud concerted within sustainable tourism development has, at its foundation, that mode of production whereby the object of the tourists desire (let’s say natural materials) become those products which may be used unsustainably, and that which the tourists are subjected to (in the material form of tourism construction).

In other words, although seemingly sustainable materials are utilised in the production of certain tourism structures, in both infrastructural developments and in tourism superstructures, (examples discussed include the Trans Amazonian Highway and the luxury ‘eco’- houseboats of Kerala, India) I demonstrate how there is sometimes erroneous meaning behind this assumed ‘sustainability’. Indeed, the use of such materials can be inherently unsustainable. The reflective aspect of modernity, which regards the world as *representation, not as activity* thus has an iron grip here, it has affected its own completion in the production of the aesthetic, where visualised ‘things’ are routinely masters of the way we experience the world. In posthumanism, however, the ‘imaginary’ activity is similarly celebrated in the spectacle (in the manner of the arbitration of signs and signals) yet crucially; it always and already bestows the abstract ideal with a material form.

In short, I suggest that tourism researchers (tourists and locals) must ask not what the material says. But what does the material *do*? In conclusion I contend that the project (the overarching principle) for tourism construction (of the future) be to configure the *relations* which bind objects, people and sustainable actions, rather than imply *abstraction*. Thus I propose a vision of a tourism world that is no longer fashioned with abstract design, which is really the construction of 'an absent' in a new, albeit different, but ineffectual matter and form, but a creator of the real *abstract*, scheming to constitute real sustainable relations between people, their actions, 'tourism things' and the world in which they are found.